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ABSTRACT

This paper describes library services to multicultural users in Sweden. The first section addresses library buildings and staff, stressing the importance of a welcoming environment. Library materials and technique are discussed in the second section, including media in other languages and access to the Internet. The third section considers communication with the surrounding society, including outreach programs and resources for young adults. The final section focuses on the mother tongue and the new language. (MES)

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To Reach Multicultural Users in Libraries - some reflections and examples from Sweden [1]

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Paper

"To reach" - what does that actually mean in library terms? The first step is to be available for what people need at the right time - to be a source for personal growth in the centre of a democratic society - a room for integration and understanding in an all too segregated world. The right to information and knowledge has become more and more important as the gap between rich and poor increases - and between those who have and those who do not have access to knowledge. Libraries build the infrastructure for democracy and equality in society.

In Sweden we have a long tradition of public libraries and a network from national libraries via county libraries to libraries in each municipality. The seventies was a time for expansion of the welfare society and library activities for disadvantaged groups were firmly established. At that time the multi-lingual library services started and are now part of the regular services guarantied by the Swedish Library Law from 1997. Standards vary, however, and there is a constant need for keeping these questions on the agenda, as the resources of the public community are shrinking. I will now describe the basics for the multicultural library followed by examples of successful work, which you can read more about in the book "The Library at the Centre of the World", published by the Swedish Library Association.

In Sweden today, more than one of ten inhabitants have foreign background. They are partly concentrated in the main cities Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, where in some suburban areas half the population are of foreign origin. In medium size industrial cities, such as Eskilstuna, Borås and Västerås about one of five are of foreign origin, but refugees from conflict areas all over the world have today made their home in many places throughout Sweden.

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Library Buildings and Staff

Each library is - or should be - the entrance to the library resources of the surrounding community and, indeed, of the whole country. The library building should have a central location and offer a welcoming environment. The main municipal library is important as it offers the possibility to have a larger variety of materials in different languages - not to forget the importance of small neighbourhood libraries where people live. These small libraries are necessary especially for children and elderly people, as they offer a more limited choice of materials suitable to the specific needs of the area.

The premises should clearly indicate that people of all ages, from all walks of life, of all languages and religions are welcome. The visitor should feel that the library is a place for both knowledge and fantasy, for leisure and inspiration, free of charge, free of demand, free from commercial advertisements, an island of well-being. There should be something inspiring to look at - a permanent work of art which makes you feel at home - and also something else such as small temporary exhibitions which open your mind for new impressions.

How does the staff meet the library visitors? Are we sufficiently involved and open-minded to the customer´s questions? Are we ready to follow the customer on the road from information to knowledge? Library work is (and will continue to be for quite some time) to choose, to organise, to systematise and to intermediate There is no such thing as just to give information - you have to involve yourself as a human being in the communication process.

- If you are to reach someone who is not accustomed to use libraries you need to give support, encourage and show the possibilities. This requires knowledge, not only of library systems and materials, but also of human beings, society and the heritage of human life, all of which is there for you in the library. To have bilingual staff is, of course, excellent but maybe possible only for the larger language groups represented in the community. There should be political instructions about this - I doubt whether it will be realised on a larger scale otherwise.

Library Materials and Technique

Are there any materials of interest to the multicultural user as he or she enters the library? What languages are spoken in the area? Media has to be related to the needs of library users, and if you don´t have bilingual staff, you should build a network of advisors from the different language groups. You also have to fight for the right to purchase media in other languages in a fair proportion to the users needs!

The facilities most asked for are newspapers and magazines, today extended by access to news on the internet. This makes the library an everyday room for many people who from there on will discover that the library is there for you when you need it. Media in other languages can be of very different content, according to the length of time that each language group has lived in the community, the age structure of the group and its interests. In Sweden, the largest minority by far is the Finnish. For them it is now important to adjust services to the needs of the elderly, not to forget the interests of second and third generations who try to maintain their mother tongue. Supply of other materials such as music, cassette books and videos are important - both for the elderly and for the second and third generation with interests in their cultural origin but less fluent in the language. For more recent language groups, e.g. from the Middle East, interests in politics and society dominate. To supply different points of view is of course essential. Religious questions, connected both with politics and society, are also asked for, as well as practical books on medicine, sex, child care, cooking and beauty to name but a few.

Modern techniques which allow access to internet and different databases widen the range of services available even in smaller libraries. In order to provide equal access to information you

must offer training for beginners, often women and elderly people, so that they are not left behind when young men occupy the machines. Minority groups do have less access to computors in their homes. If the library offers the tools for people to acquire computer literacy, it also provides access to information which might be needed for a good quality of life.

Communication with the Surrounding Society

There is a library; there is the staff; there are materials and technique to offer, but how do the people of the surrounding community find these facilities? The clue is, of course, to reach out with information to where the people are: in schools where newcomers study Swedish, in kindergartens, homes for the elderly, at the immigrations office and in the immigrants´ organisations. You invite them to the library, present the facilities and open a dialogue about needs and preferences. In each language group you find persons with influence and knowledge, ask their advice, invite them to make an exhibition on an important issue, arrange a lecture ora discussion. When you arrange something like this, maybe once or twice a year, you will soon have other groups waiting for their turn. If you are successful, mouth to mouth information is very quick among the minority groups.

You might have Chinese New Year´s celebration and children´s paper work from school, an exhibition of photos from the Middle East and the life of the Kurdish minority together with a lecture on history and future of a political conflict in the area, as we had in Eskilstuna. You offer the necessary conditions for an open meeting place, a cross-roads for people with ideas allowing them to make their voices heard. In this way you initiate new contacts within the groups and the library becomes an arena for what is on the agenda in the local community, opening the way into society and to the rest of the world.

In Rinkeby, the multicultural suburb of Stockholm, there is a large annual event, the International Book Fair, where publishers and authors in other languages meet their readers. Immigrant authors translated into Swedish also make public appearances and make their resources visible to the Swedish society. In the future they will enrichen the Swedish literature as is the case today in English literature with authors who have African, Indian and Chinese background.

Also in Rinkeby, the successful project "Abraham´s children" takes place. Staff from the library and the schools work together with the common heritage from Jewish tradition, from Christianity and from Islam. In many ways, creativity, reading and storytelling result in mutual understanding. Other forms of reading promotion and creative writing take place in Rinkeby as well as in many other communities in Sweden. The purpose is to strengthen language abilities, both among immigrant children and others. Writing your thoughts and memories, reading books suitable to your abilities and interests - in the language you prefer - promote self esteem and willingness to learn.

Both children and adults who study might need help to overcome difficulties, especially if they study in a new second language. The library most certainly doesn´t have enough staff for this extra help, but it may be possible to contact voluntary workers such as students or senior citizens who enjoy helping others in the library. Several successful examples of this can be found in Swedish libraries, e.g. in Tensta, a suburb of Stockholm.

You must not forget young adults as you work with more easy-to-reach groups. In this important stage of life when young people´s personality and future are formed, the library should provide resources to match up to their needs. If the library starts a youth information, young people can find "a third party" to talk to between the parents and the school. In Eskilstuna, UngInfo plays this role and helps young people find their own way into society, "over the threshold". Those of foreign origin maybe need this support more than others, and the international approach in questions concerning work and studies for young people benefits their self esteem, even if they themselves choose to remain in their new country. To make this

youth information successful you need to build it in cooperation with and participation of young people. Maybe this is the model for all sucessful library work: to involve the target group in one way or another. But this knowledge is not new, as you can tell from the old Chinese proverb:

"Tell me and I forget, Work with me and I know, Involve me and I understand"

The Mother Tongue and the New Language

Why is it so important to have library materials in the language spoken by minorities? Shouldn´t they learn to speak the majority language as soon as possible? Of course the new language is the key to society, to study and to work. But the mother tongue is your heart and your feeling, the key to contact with your origin and with the future of your home country, the key to contact between parents, grandparents and children. Being able to speak more than one language is a benefit both to the individual and to society. Good knowledge of your mother tongue dosesn´t prevent you from learning one or several new languages - on the contrary, it makes it easier! With strong roots in your own language you can not only develop many flowers in other languages, but also enjoy your mother tongue as your own personal jewel.

For elderly people of foreign origin the mother tongue is essential. Perhaps they never learned the new language, and even if they did acquire a good ability, they tend to forget the new language as they grow older and they may even loose it completely. The library has to be aware of this when bringing books to homes for the elderly and in the "books-on-wheels" services. The quality of life - and sometimes the difference between health or illness - is very much dependent on the possibility to talk and remember, to read and listen to your mother tongue. As the Sami writer Paulus Utsi said:

"Nothing is rooted with the human being
So deeply as the mother tongue
Liberating our thoughts
Expanding our senses
Soothing the way we live"

It may seem ironic, but one of the best ways to give information about library resources in other languages is to invite groups of people studying Swedish to visit and learn about the library as a whole. As they are newcomers in society they quickly find this open place worth returning to. As time goes by their needs change and they discover that there is something for each stage of life at the library.

Conclusion

There are no shortcuts to reach multicultural users in libraries. It requires hard work at all levels, including library politics on the whole for the library´s role in society and in democracy. It requires personal commitment from the staff and involvement from the library users. It requires awareness that knowledge is the fundament of equal society and that the right to information is a condition for human development wherever one may live. It´s a priviledge to work at a library and take part in that process. My contribution is to share my experience of the importance in giving nourishment to the survival of minority languages. I quote the author Antti Jalava of Finnish origin, who during his childhood in Sweden lost his mother tongue an then recovered it:

"The Finnish language is my skin, my air, my snowfall, my anger and my sorrow. It is the language which heals my deepest wounds and in which I express my feelings. Finnsih is the very origin of what I am."

Reference:

"The Library at the Center of the World",
published by the Swedish Library Association and Btj Group, Lund, Sweden, 1999.

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